

From 9/11 to Pope's remark: What is the pattern?



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Recently, Pope Benedict XVI quoted the words of the 14th-century Byzantine emperor Manuel II: “Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.” The remark of reverent Pope came at a time when the West is grappling with a fear of, and paranoia about, Muslims in post-9/11 world, and the remark adds fuel to the rocky relationship between the West and the world of Islam. “We cannot afford to maintain these ancient prejudices against Islam. The Pope’s remarks were dangerous, and will convince many more Muslims that the West is incurably Islamophobic” a vehement remark made by a prominent scholar Karen Armstrong, the author of the book “Islam: A Short Story”. Was Islam really spread by “sword”? If so, why do the Muslims deny this historical fact? If no, then, why does the West represent Islam with a negative concoction and fabrication of the history of Islam tracing a medieval quote, which currently has a far-sighting political implication?

The sword of historical truth and rational analysis will disprove the claim that Islam was spread by sword or force.

First, Muslims ruled Spain for about 800 years. The Muslims in Spain never used the sword to force the people to convert. Later the Christian Crusaders came to Spain and wiped out the Muslims. There was not a single Muslim in Spain who could openly give the *adhan*, which is the call for prayers.

Second, Muslims were the lords of Arabia for 1400 years, with an exception of few years of British and French rule. Overall, the Muslims ruled Arabia for 1400 years. Yet today, there are 14 million Arabs who are Coptic Christians i.e. Christians since generations. If the Muslims had used the sword there would not have been a single Arab who would have remained a Christian.

Third, The Muslims ruled India for about a thousand years. If they wanted, they had the power of converting each and every non-Muslim of India to Islam. Today more than 80% of the populations of India are non-Muslims. All these non-Muslim Indians are bearing witness today that Islam was not spread by the sword.

Fourth, Indonesia is a country that has the maximum number of Muslims in the world. The majority of people in Malaysia are Muslims. May one ask, "Which Muslim army went to Indonesia and Malaysia?" Similarly, Islam has spread rapidly on the East Coast of Africa. One may again ask, if Islam was spread by the sword, "Which Muslim army went to the East Coast of Africa?"

Fifth, An article in Reader's Digest 'Almanac', year book 1986, gave the statistics of the increase of percentage of the major religions of the world in half a century from 1934 to 1984. This article also appeared in 'The Plain Truth' magazine. At the top was Islam, which increased by 235%, and Christianity had increased only by 47%. May one ask, which war took place in this century which converted millions of people to Islam? Similarly, today the fastest growing religion in America is Islam. The fastest growing religion in Europe is also Islam. Which sword is forcing people in the West to accept Islam in such large numbers?

Then, with which "sword" was Islam spread? Even if Muslims had it they could not use it to spread Islam because the Qur'an says in the following verse: "Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from error" (Al-Qur'an 2:256). Islam promotes peace. At the same time, Islam exhorts its followers to fight where there is oppression. The fight against oppression may, at times, require the use of force. In Islam force can only be used to promote peace and justice. If there were any sword in converting people to Islam, that was the sword of intellect that conquers the hearts and minds of people. The Qur'an says: "Invite (all) to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious." (Al-Qur'an 16:125).

The best reply to the misconception that Islam was spread by the sword is given by the noted historian De Lacy O'Leary in the book "Islam at the cross road" (Page 8): "History makes it clear however, that the legend of fanatical Muslims sweeping through the world and forcing Islam at the point of the sword upon conquered races is one of the most fantastically absurd myth that historians have ever repeated." Dr. Joseph Adam Pearson rightly says, "People who worry that nuclear weaponry will one day fall in the hands of the Arabs, fail to realize that the Islamic bomb has been dropped already, it fell the day MUHAMMED (pbuh) was born".

Even then, why does the West indulge in, and more apparently create discursively and intentionally, hatred against Islam and its followers, and construct a fabricated tale linking Islam to force or terrorism, in which the West *per se* is dragging a huge blunder and stigma of doing the same? Karen Armstrong reminds us, "Our Islamophobia dates back to the time of the Crusades, and is entwined with our chronic anti-semitism. Some of the first Crusaders began their journey to the Holy Land by massacring the Jewish communities along the Rhine valley; the Crusaders ended their campaign in 1099 by slaughtering some 30,000 Muslims and Jews in Jerusalem. It is always difficult to forgive people we know we have wronged. Thenceforth Jews and Muslims became the shadow-self of Christendom, the mirror image of everything that we hoped we were not - or feared that we were." The history of crusades and brutal colonization reveals the

historical fact that beyond the West, the spread of Christianity, and not Islam, was made possible by the use of force and sword, and the involvement of Pope was very apparent during those turbulent centuries. Then, why does the West impose its own historical guilt on Muslims?

Today one can clearly see that in the Western media and academia, Muslims are discursively constructed as “other”. Many of these constructions equate Islam with evil through portrayals of Muslims as an irrational, uncivilized, threatening and uniquely fundamentalist “other”. Debasing the holy Qur'an in the Guantanamo Bay as well as in the Abu Gharib prison, constructing lampoons on the holy prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) via caricatured images in the Danish newspaper and their reappearance in other European papers, and finally Pope’s unruly remark on Islam and its Prophet show the same genealogy of hate crime against Muslims which subvert the possibility of interfaith dialogue and a peaceful coexistence. “Hatred of Islam is so ubiquitous and so deeply rooted in western culture that it brings together people who are usually at daggers drawn. Neither the Danish cartoonists, who published the offensive caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad last February, nor the Christian fundamentalists who have called him a paedophile and a terrorist, would ordinarily make common cause with the Pope; yet on the subject of Islam they are in full agreement” Karen added.

Pope’s remark does not contribute to, but rather disrupt, the interfaith dialogue at a juncture when the peace-loving world is grappling with finding a common platform for Abrahamic faiths- Islam, Christianity and Judaism. The cultural crusades on Islam/Muslims in the name of “the clash of civilization” or a “holy war against the terrorists” are leaving ongoing catastrophic legacies in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Israeli-occupied territories. When a community or a religion is discursively portrayed with some dangerous negative images, the community then automatically becomes preamble to certain treatments and interventions, and thus the former justifies the later. Discursive concoction of Muslims and its glorious history with negative images is nothing but an attempt to justify Bush’s brutal “war on terror” that serves the interests of a powerful capitalist few at the expense of thousands of Muslims’ lives and their and others’ civil liberty.

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